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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 004292

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SUBJECT: A VISIT TO THE PROTEST'S GROUND ZERO

REF: MEXICO 4238

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On July 31 and August 2, Poloffs visited Mexico City's central square or Zocalo to observe ground zero in the ongoing protest of the supporters of PRD candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). Thousands of demonstrators were camped out in the Zocalo and on Juarez and Madero streets, as well as on Paseo de la Reforma, all major streets leading from the Zocalo. Camps appeared to be well organized with about 100 supporters in each of the 31 encampments (one for each state) within the Zocalo, with sixteen additional encampments (one for each Mexico City ward) along major roads, including Paseo de la Reforma. According to demonstrators, their goal is to keep the number of people in each camp stable until the Tribunal calls for a "vote-by-vote" recount. Many are prepared to camp out for weeks, while others expect to be replaced by a fresh band of supporters every few days. Most supporters indicated that if the Tribunal does not rule in their favor, they would wait for further direction from AMLO. Overall, the environment in the Zocalo and on the blockaded streets was very much like that of a block party, with live music, street vendors selling food, and even chess tournaments taking place under tents. Supporters emphasized that the protests would remain peaceful, but indicated that more forms of civil resistance might be forthcoming. End Summary.

A Visit to Ground Zero

¶2. (SBU) On July 31, Poloffs visited "the Permanent Assembly" called for by AMLO in his July 30 speech (reftel). Most encampment activity appears to be concentrated in the Zocalo, followed by the nearby main street of Juarez. The encampments were well-organized, grouping protesters representing states or civil society organizations, and a stream of large shuttle buses belonging to various state contingents surrounded the plaza. In one area on the plaza, AMLO supporters had set up a stand where people could photocopy their voting credentials and submit them in a "symbolic urn" to demonstrate support for the PRD candidate. The general atmosphere of both the Zocalo and the blockaded streets seemed to be rather festive. Vendors selling food, jewelry, and clothing, among other goods, were common. Most demonstrators seemed to be enjoying themselves. One tent near the Palacio de Bellas Artes even had a chess tournament under way.

¶3. (SBU) Poloffs spoke to several groups camped out on the Zocalo -- including the Workers Party and supporters from Guerrero, Morelos, Tabasco, Hidalgo, Veracruz, Coahuila, Oaxaca, and Sonora. Protesters discussed their reasons for coming and their expected length of stay. With about 100

people in each state camp, some said that they planned on staying for the "long-haul," while others said that they would leave once they were replaced by a fresh band of supporters -- with the goal of keeping camp numbers stable throughout the duration of the protest. All camps agreed they would stay until the Tribunal reached a decision and/or until they receive instructions from AMLO on what to do next.

PRD supporters emphasized that the protests would remain peaceful and that no one wanted to provoke violence.

Specific Comments

¶4. (U) A young woman from Mexico City, who appeared to be a camp organizer, said that many of the people in her cadre, mostly from Mexico City and Cuernavaca, had come to protest what they viewed as irregularities at the polls. She said many of her colleagues were concerned that President Bush appeared to be backing Calderon before he was declared President-elect. An older woman from the state of Guerrero said she came to the Zocalo out of anger about alleged vote-buying in her local town, claiming the PAN was paying 300 pesos per vote. At the Tabasco camp, a young man commented that the Tabasco group's 100 participants planned to stay until the decision of the Tribunal. In the event the court does not rule in their favor, they would wait for instructions from AMLO. As for demonstrators from Coahuila, a Deputy from the state cited distrust in how IFE conducted the vote tallies as one of the reasons her contingent had come. She also complained that the media had helped to manipulate the elections against the PRD. She said she did not know what would happen if the Tribunal rejected AMLO's call for a complete recount of the votes.

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A Follow-Up Visit

¶5. (U) Poloffs made a follow up visit on August 2 to reassess the situation in the Zocalo. Compared to two days prior, the permanent encampment had become somewhat more organized, with many more tents spread across the plaza. The crowd appeared about the same in number, if not smaller, as more tents had taken up space along the main plaza. As on Paseo de la Reforma, many tents appeared to be sparsely populated. The overall atmosphere was still festive, with music playing and street vendors selling their goods to the plaza's new tenants. However, one noticeable change was that masked protesters had blockaded Pino Suarez, a street that branches out from the Zocalo. In the tents themselves, it appeared the demonstrators had brought in everyday necessities, preparing to camp out for the foreseeable future. A man helping to organize the Oaxaca camp said that his group, which he estimated at over 300 people, was prepared to stay until September 6, the day in which the Electoral Tribunal must certify the election and declare a winner. Poloffs also spoke to three men from the Sonora state camp. They had come because they believed that systematic fraud had occurred, and that the only way to restore the credibility of the electoral process was to carry out a complete recount as AMLO has demanded. They believed more civil disobedience would take place if the Tribunal did not rule in AMLO's favor.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) After speaking with demonstrators, it became clear that those who have decided to stay in the encampments are AMLO's core supporters, and many repeated the same arguments as to why the election results needed to be protested. In many cases, it seemed as if the demonstrators were simply repeating what they had been told during AMLO's "informative assemblies" over the previous weeks. While the protests are causing serious disruption to Mexico City traffic and

commerce, the protesters appeared sincere in their desire to maintain a peaceful, if not festive, resistance to what they and their candidate consider to be a fraudulent election. Most of the supporters appear prepared to stay until the decision of the Tribunal, unless AMLO instructs them otherwise.

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